Fairy tales for adults and other substances

The Wizard of Oz

It was exactly twelve o'clock. A large crowd had gathered in the main square of Cuntas, a city in Northern Oz. A pretentious-looking man stepped out of a black Mercedes, dressed in an expensive suit. His polished black shoes clacked as he stepped onto the stage, which was made from several wooden planks.

The man was Duo Karparo, President of Northern Oz—a small country in the Pacific Ocean that borders Southern Oz. Karparo looked drowsy, perhaps even slightly hungover. The blue taupe on his head was askew, tilted to one side and nearly upside down. He stood in front of the microphone, gazing at the crowd.

"Test... one, two!" he barked into the microphone. A loud screech rang out in response.

Ten thousand people stood in silence, eyes fixed on him, eagerly awaiting the president's big speech. The hush was almost hypnotic. Karparo glanced up at the sky, then at the crowd, and took a deep breath. He leaned in toward the microphone. Just as he was about to begin, a sudden puff of air escaped his throat, producing a sound like a croaking frog.

Karparo burped into the microphone.

The crowd frowned and murmured in disapproval. Occasional whistles of protest pierced the silence. Karparo gestured with his hands, trying to calm the crowd—but he didn't apologize. He didn't even smile. Instead, he rummaged through his pockets with a scowl. From his left pocket, he pulled out a crumpled piece of paper—his speech.

Holding the paper in front of his dazed face, he began:

"Ladies and gentlemen! Dear fellow countrymen!

We will make Northern Oz great again!"

An egg flew from the crowd, narrowly missing his head. Someone had aimed at the president. Fortunately, he dodged it and continued:

"Southern Oz should beware, or they will feel our rage and our fire! As long as I am president, Southern Oz will not harm a single citizen of this great country… which will be great again! With our economic growth and investments worth billions and billions of dollars, our country will stand firm—and be great... again."

It was clear he wasn't putting much effort into it.

Then, another egg flew—this time hitting him squarely on the head. Another followed. Then a tomato. Within moments, the enraged crowd pelted President Duo Karparo with rotten vegetables.

"We've had enough of you politicians!" they shouted.

"You're over and out!" came the cries.

"We want change!" the people roared.

The furious crowd shoved President Karparo back into his Mercedes and let the automatic driver take him far beyond the borders of Northern Oz. The nation was finally

free. They had expelled the last politician who had burdened their lives with empty speeches, broken promises, and scandals.

The people celebrated. They sang songs of peace and pledged to treat the people of Southern Oz as brothers. Along the border, the Northern Oz choir raised their voices in a song of reconciliation:

“When the moon is in the Seventh House
And Jupiter aligns with Mars
Then peace will guide the planets
And love will steer the stars!”

Strangely enough, the same thing had just happened in Southern Oz. As so often occurs in human history, anger boils over in many hearts at once. Patience has an expiration date—wise politicians use their final days wisely; weak ones only hasten their fall. Southern Oz had also cast out its leaders and was joyfully entering a new era of peace and freedom.

Now, people from Southern Oz rushed toward Northern Oz to sing with their newfound brothers. Together, they sang that old anthem of the Age of Aquarius, dreaming of peace and prosperity.

Politicians, the people claimed, had been the only obstacle to unity—a better society, free from inequality, lay just beyond their removal. Politicians were the root of all problems. Without them, there will be a utopia. Without them, there will be peace.

“Without a leader,” they thought, “each of us will become a small leader, each playing a vital role in the evolution of our society.”

But one question remained:

How do you unite thousands of small leaders, from across the vast island, into a single mechanism to govern Northern and Southern Oz?

Then came the answer: a computer.

In the capital of Northern Oz, they installed a massive device resembling a Turing machine, with futuristic elements that gave it an imposing, almost divine presence. This central computer was linked to every computer in Northern Oz. It synthesized the thoughts and data of the entire population into one collective entity. From this, it made decisions on how the country should be governed—dispassionately and objectively.

But this was no ordinary computer. It didn’t simply register votes or reflect public opinion as stated. It processed everything: Facebook posts, Instagram likes, tweets, emails, photos, files—every trace of digital activity. Based on this information, it developed a psychological profile for each person, predicting what they truly and deeply wanted regarding social and economic issues.

By aggregating these profiles, the computer formed a composite "will of the people." The result was a decision-making process that, to a remarkable degree, mirrored the population’s genuine desires.

Thanks to its intelligence, speed, and insight, the machine was named:
“The Wizard of Oz.”
Northern Oz donated the patent to Southern Oz, which soon produced an identical computer. The computer was unmistakable, and civilization advanced so rapidly that, for the first time in history, Utopia was guaranteed.
And then, Gordon Price decided to spend a peaceful afternoon by the river.
Gordon Price was a twenty-one-year-old from Northern Oz. He was a dreamer and a passionate reader of old novels. Sometimes, he would go out to a bar or a gig, dressed in a black coat, pretending to be a hero from those old black-and-white movies, impatient to meet the woman of his dreams — his femme fatale. But instead of finding her, he would usually end up with a group of dull writers of uninspired weekend thrillers or pop musicians, sitting in silence until dawn. Then, he'd stumble home drunk, collapse into bed, and think about his life.
Yes, this was Utopia. Yes, life was beautiful. But his life was also unbearably dull — like a flat, dark line racing toward the grave year by year, yet dragging on hour by hour. There was nothing. No woman in his life to share the fire of his passion, no body to shudder beneath him, moaning with desire. No music with bass loud enough to spark adrenaline, no drums pounding to the rhythm of a wild heart. There were no melancholic writers either — for in Utopia, there was no pain, no criticism. But there was no magic either.
Gordon Price was bored to death. That week, he decided to spend a quiet afternoon by the river, chewing a special kind of grass. He had read in an old book about people who chewed a particular black grass that opened the door to a world of magic. Under its influence, some could even glimpse the future. Some, according to legend, died and came back to life. Some even saw God.
Sitting by the river, sunbathing in the breeze, Gordon held a bundle of black grass in his left hand. He was a little scared, but curiosity soon outweighed his fear. He plucked a blade of grass, placed it in his mouth, and chewed. Nothing happened. He tried another. And another. And another. Disappointed that he hadn’t met God, he decided it was time to head home.
Then, suddenly, something knocked him to the ground. It was a spectrum of all the colors that existed — and not just those visible to the human eye, but all the colors of the universe. He saw a miraculously beautiful shinia color. He saw the inconceivable canoe color. And then, nestled between lemon yellow and sunny yellow, he saw a color called ra — the most beautiful shade the universe had ever created.
Just as Gordon was overwhelmed with unthinkable joy from these magical colors, he saw something else. A bomb blast. People dying. People burning in man-made fires of hell. He saw nations slaughtering each other for no reason, just because some leader

told them to. He witnessed the horrors of humankind's past and felt inconceivable human suffering.
But Gordon Price didn't know it was the past. He thought he had seen the future. That's why he ran, panicked, into the city square, climbed onto the old wooden stage, and shouted:
"People! They're going to attack!"
"Who's going to attack?" asked a woman in the crowd.
"Southern Oz! Southern Oz is going to attack us. They'll drop the bomb! We'll all burn! Oh, we'll… we'll suffer in ways we can't even imagine!" Gordon Price cried, then burst into tears.
The people of Northern Oz were deeply alarmed. They turned to their almighty computer for answers. They entered the following code:
system.out.printlnAnswer("Will Southern Oz bomb us?");
The computer responded instantly. On the blue screen, in stark white letters, it clearly read:
"I don't know."
Someone in the crowd pointed out that the computer couldn't possibly know what was happening in Southern Oz. The computer was only programmed to handle the internal affairs of Northern Oz. So, they needed to rephrase the question.
The new question was:
system.out.printlnAnswer("Do we need to attack Southern Oz?");
The computer immediately replied:
"No."
"We've been hacked!" a woman in the crowd shouted. "Southern Oz has hacked our Wizard! They're going to attack us!"
A young woman fainted. Several men rushed to her with a glass of water. Meanwhile, a few wise elders gathered in front of the computer screen, trying to calm the rising panic.
"People, people!" one of the elders called out. "We shouldn't panic! We've uncovered their plans just in time. We can act before it's too late. We'll organize an emergency council and carefully plan our next step. Stay calm, and I promise you — Northern Oz will be great again!"
A five-member council was quickly formed. Its president, Treo Kuntas, led the meeting for three hours.
At exactly 11:00 PM, he emerged with the final decision: a bomb would be extracted from the museum and used as a preemptive strike against Southern Oz.
On September 23rd, 2022, Northern Oz bombed the capital of Southern Oz. Days later, Southern Oz retaliated. War had officially begun. The Golden Age of Aquarius was over, and Gordon Price was no longer bored.

There were no old bookstores left — they had all burned to the ground. Gordon had no friends left — they had fallen one by one in the trenches. He never met his femme fatale. But fearful of the next bombing, Gordon never felt bored again.

Gordon Price died in October 2022, at the age of twenty-three. That same year, the computer known as the *Wizard of Oz* was destroyed in a fire. Witnesses claim that as the Wizard burned, its screen lit up with one final message, written in glowing white letters on a blue background:

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output.print("You are complete idiots.");
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Cinderella

She never really had a name.

In the city where she was born—a place she barely remembers—they gave her a nickname: *Cinderella*. Like a seal on the paper of her destiny. She was born among the nameless, in a land of deep poverty, its borders fenced off by hostility and segregation.

Cinderella was strikingly beautiful. Her hair was blonde, her eyes warm and black as midnight coffee. Her face, though worn and weary, still held something gentle and naïve. At twenty-two, she finished her studies while working, and left her nameless country in search of happiness.

It was Wednesday, September twenty-fourth, when Cinderella celebrated her thirty-first birthday. She was still youthful, still beautiful. Her beauty was so radiant she seemed to glow like a bright summer star—completely unaware of the impression she left on others. That day, she sat alone in her rented apartment in London, lighting a candle on a cheap biscuit-and-cream cake she'd picked up at a bakery after work.

“Well, happy birthday to me,” she sighed, scanning the room, collecting impressions of her life inside this small, rented attic.

Through a thin curtain, moonlight stretched into the room, bathing it in a magical blue glow. She looked at the peeling paint on the window frame, then at the spider that had moved in to keep her company, building its delicate little home in the left corner of the room. Her gaze swept across the space: an old chandelier, a computer, empty walls stripped of memories, one bed, a small closet. A life unpacked from a suitcase. A life that could just as easily be packed back into one. Always chasing work, always trying harder, giving everything, fighting to survive, eating just to avoid being eaten. Always alone. That’s life in a suitcase.

By the bed stood a small nightstand. She studied it carefully. Everything that summed up her life was sitting there: an empty cup with an Earl Grey tea bag dangling over the side, a box of cigarettes, a pipe, and a small bag of weed. Coconut-scented body lotion. A box of Xanax. George Orwell’s *Down and Out in Paris and London*. Seven euros and fifty cents. An ashtray with *Budapest Hotel* written on it. A red lipstick she no longer wore. An organizer and a pencil.

She lit a cigarette, picked up the organizer and the pencil, pulled out a blank sheet, and wrote: *I hate my job.*

Then she pressed the pencil harder, scrawling it again in bold, angry letters: *I hate my job.*

Beneath that, she scribbled a small, neat note—like a quiet warning: *Maybe my life has no purpose. Maybe no one's life does. We are nameless. Maybe that’s the only truth.*

Cinderella worked constantly. Early mornings, late nights, always exhausted. Her job was monotonous, unfulfilling—and yet still demanding and stressful.

Every day, she shared an office with nine other women. All of them, except her, were consumed by a merciless, animalistic hunger for promotion. Every morning, she woke with a familiar bitterness in her throat, wishing she could just sleep and dream forever. But she always got up. She climbed those stairs, heading straight to the office, listening to the same mechanical voice echoing through the halls:
"Employee 142, report to the office."
"Employee 155, contact the manager."
"Employee 445..."
When the announcements stopped, the silence was broken only by the dull hum of the production plant or the arguments of colleagues who couldn't stand each other.
Each evening, Cinderella returned to her attic room, drained. At the entrance, she often ran into Maria. Maria was a bikini model—not exactly world-famous, but successful enough. Her life was far easier than most, and her earnings more than sufficient. But Maria was twenty-six—already ageing out of the brutal modeling industry. She knew it. That's why she hunted for a wealthy nobleman at every royal party and high-society ball she could sneak into.
Cinderella, on the other hand, had never set foot in a royal ballroom. If she ever dreamed of such things, those dreams had long died. Instead of fantasizing about princes and castles, she spent her evenings with a large serving of French fries and wine—or Xanax. On Fridays, if the weather allowed (a rare occasion in London), she sometimes took a walk. On Sunday nights, she lay in despair, fantasizing about killing her boss—and his boss. But on that particular September 24th, on her birthday, her fantasies turned darker. She imagined her company—and all the companies like it that had stolen people's lives and dreams—burning in an unstoppable blaze.
She debated how to mark her birthday: smoke some weed and watch a cheesy Freddie Prinze Jr. movie, or crack open a bottle of wine? She settled on the wine. One glass turned into another. Eventually, she drank straight from the bottle. The sweet taste of oblivion melted on her tongue.
She was staring out at the city's glowing blue night when suddenly, the sky lit up in orange. Fire.
Screams and sirens pierced the night. Another riot. The asphalt burned. Protesters flooded the streets—the urban guerrilla was angry again. And, in that moment, so was Cinderella.
She threw on a black tracksuit, a black hooded jacket, wrapped a scarf around her face, and headed to the protest. The anarchist *A* was sprayed fresh on a nearby window, dripping down the glass. Tear gas filled the air. Cinderella closed her eyes, tightening the scarf. Fear gripped her. She prayed the people in black weren't armed. A civil war wasn't exactly how she'd pictured her birthday.

A thousand thoughts raced through her mind. She didn't know how to melt into the crowd. But she stood with the anarchists, chanting with them:
"We want justice!" Cinderella yelled.
"Justice, equality, truth!" the crowd roared back.
The riot didn't last long. The crowd dissolved quickly—no justice, no equality. Just tear gas and exhaustion. An anarchist beside her offered a cigarette. They sat on a bench, pulled down their scarves, and smoked.
She studied him: dark skin, full lips, deep black eyes. His hands were rough and cracked—likely from hard labor, she thought. Probably an immigrant, like her. Maybe he had a degree, like her, but no opportunities. Maybe, like her, his work sickened him to the bone. Just another victim of being born in the wrong place at the wrong time.
"No one cares how well you work, or how smart you are," she said.
"Our intelligence doesn't benefit them. It threatens them," he replied with a cynical laugh.
"Is arson and destruction really our only way to fight?" she asked.
"It's not your only way. You're beautiful," he answered.
He handed her an invitation—for the prince's ball.
"Not all noblemen are bad. Especially when they fall for a pretty girl. Go to the ball. Find yourself a rich husband. Save yourself," he told her.
Cinderella didn't want the ball. She wanted to go home with him that night. But before she could ask his name, the anarchist disappeared, leaving only the invitation in her lap.
Maybe he was right, she thought. Maybe the ball was her golden ticket. After all, what future could she possibly have with a broke young anarchist, no stable job, with a mortgage and *IKEA* furniture? What kind of future is there for a nameless generation that fits its life into a suitcase? She slipped the invitation into her pocket.
"I'll go to the ball," she thought. But the ball was tomorrow. She needed to prepare.
Her hands trembled. Some abstract fear gripped her. What was there to lose? The nameless were supposed to be used to fear. But no one truly gets used to fear. When the trembling starts, when the panic rises, when the thought of failure makes you sick—you know your strength will betray you. And no one can help you. That's when fear swallows you whole. You live on, not even realizing you're already dead inside.
Still, some greater force pushed her toward that damned prince's ball. She cursed it—but embraced it like a gift. She cynically despised it—but her heart pounded with excitement. She applied her makeup with care, combed her hair to perfection. In the moonlit reflection of the attic window, she saw her new face: white, blue, hauntingly beautiful—so excessive in a world of factory ashes and industrial sawdust.
She wore high-heeled shoes, thin as glass. She could barely walk. Step by step, she made her way to the castle. Horses and chariots? Please. She walked. Her shoes

pinched her feet, making her waddle like a duck. By the time she arrived, she was sweaty, her makeup smudged.
Maria was already there—draped in a ridiculous wig like a modern Marie Antoinette, swinging her *Versace* bag, acrylic nails gleaming, her tight dress showing off every curve.
Cinderella kept her head down, defeated. She ordered a double whiskey, downed it, then another. She smoked cigarette after cigarette, wondering why the hell she'd come. Wondering if there was any place—a safe haven—for people like her.
The evening grew unbearable. No prince paid her any attention. How stupid could she be? You don't come to a ball with expectations. Balls are for partying, for sex in the pool, for cocktails and cocaine. And though Cinderella wasn't prudish—and the thought of poolside sex or euphoric highs didn't repel her—she didn't belong here. Bills, rent, and the crushing weight of survival had stolen the concept of fun from her.
Whiskey after whiskey, but still sober. Suddenly, she bolted outside, hiding in the bushes under the heavy velvet curtains. She was cracking. As much as she wanted to deny it, she belonged with the rebels. No amount of wealth could pull her back to the cult of money. Even if millions rained from the sky, she wouldn't change her mind. Money—the demon *Mammon*—had devoured too many souls already.
Then, from the balcony overhead, she heard voices:
"He must come out. I don't care. All these women are here for him!" the queen mother barked.
"But he can't… the boy is different… special… so what…" the king muttered.
"Biiiird!" came another voice—the prince, no doubt.
Cinderella climbed the balcony, peering in.
The prince sat on the bed, staring at a photo of a bird in an encyclopedia. His mother fumed, red-faced, desperate to marry him off. The king looked bored, scanning the ballroom.
"Who'd marry him anyway?" the king asked.
"It doesn't matter! Find some poor girl, blinded by the castle's beauty. Someone nameless, hardworking, naïve enough to believe her labor means anything in this rotten system. We'll use her. The kingdom will rest on her shoulders, but she won't rule. The prince will be in her bed—but never touch her. By the time she sees through the game, it'll be too late."
"You've cursed the hope of the nameless. That's all they have," the king said.
"Biiiird," the prince chimed in.
"Shut up! Stay quiet, stay beautiful, stay rich. That's all you need," the queen snapped.
As the queen stormed out, Cinderella slipped down the pillar—one of her shoes falling off. The prince approached the window, spotting her.

"You’re beautiful," he whispered.
"God, you’re so beautiful." He stroked her hair.
"What’s your name?"
"Cinderella."
"I’ll call you Star. Why only one shoe?"
"Because I can’t walk properly in them. I just… I can’t be what they expect me to be."
He sighed. He understood. He couldn’t be what they expected either.
The queen mother burst back in.
"Whaaaat?!" she shrieked.
Cinderella panicked, slid down the pillar, and ran—one shoe on, one off—all the way home. She collapsed onto her bed, blanket over her head, heart pounding as the church bells struck midnight and rain began to fall.
The next morning, the bells rang again—a wedding was happening. The prince, under his mother’s blessing, was marrying Maria. A neat little fairy tale was spun: Maria happened to pass his window, he saw her, fell in love at first sight. The masses ate it up. Except one taxi driver. He claimed he saw the queen mother digging through cat shit, forcing Maria’s foot into Cinderella’s missing shoe.
"There! No one will ever know!" the queen hissed.
Despite the driver’s story, people clung to the fairytale.
That evening, at the engagement party, Maria gushed:
"My love, who would’ve thought? I didn’t even want to go to the ball! What a fantastic coincidence!"
The crowd waited for the prince’s reply.
"Say something!" the queen urged, elbowing him.
The prince tugged at his hair, stared at Maria, then his parents, then back at Maria.
"Biiiird," he muttered.
The queen froze—then forced applause, shouting to the orchestra:
"You heard him! Play ‘Bird’! Drinks for all the nameless!"
The celebration raged until dawn.
Cinderella woke to her alarm in the attic. Music still echoed from Equality and Freedom Square—soon to be renamed Maria’s Square. The autoplay continued, genre-less, random.
But then, a familiar melody drifted through her window:
"Debout, les damnés de la terre[1]…"
Cinderella got up and went to work.

The Snow Queen

Once upon a time, there was an Evil Spirit — more rotten than all the other spirits.

The Evil Spirit sat on Ivy Gertra's neck. Ivy couldn't see him, but she could feel his weight, his pressure, the sharp pain creeping down to her bones and along her spine. The spirit had magnificent horns, like those of a mountain ram, and his black head resembled a Mongolian sheep. In his hand, a red snake lay coiled, asleep. He was only half-dressed; his bare chest resembled that of a woman. No one could say for sure whether this spirit was male or female. He never laughed. He was a professional rider of human necks.

But Ivy Gertra couldn't see him.

Although invisible to her, she could feel his presence — and the burden he carried. Without even knowing he existed, Ivy had become cynical and bitter. Her attitude drew the most corrupted souls into her life, one after another, leaving her faith in humanity in ruins. Her heart slowly turned to ice. And once a human heart turns to ice, life itself becomes an eternal winter.

That was Ivy Gertra's fate.

One night, Ivy smoked a strange substance from a pipe, unaware that a completely different kind of spirit was sleeping inside it. The moment she inhaled, the spirit awoke from his hundred-year slumber and appeared before her.

He was blue, with three bright orange eyes.

"What the hell are you doing, you perverted creature?!" he shouted, climbing out of the pipe.

"Excuse me, I…" Ivy stammered.

"You people... you'll shove anything filthy into your mouths. One day you'll end up sucking each other's c—… never mind," he muttered, rolling his eyes.

Ivy skeptically raised an eyebrow.

"Who are you, and why are *you* waking *me* up?"

"I didn't know anyone was napping inside a psychoactive substance. Are you the spirit that grants three wishes?"

"No. I'm one of the ones who grant countless wishes — but only if you participate in making them come true. Name's Papa Legba."

"And… you live in a pipe?" Ivy asked.

"I live wherever people are looking for me. So, tell me, darling, why did you summon me?"

"But I didn't summon you!" Ivy protested.

"Ahh… you're being *ridden*! Baphomet is riding you!" he exclaimed, squinting at her. "Wait, wait… who *are* you, pretty girl? What do you believe in?"

"I'm an agnostic," Ivy replied.

"Riiiight… and I'm a ghost. Care to explain that a little more precisely?"

“I believe in God. And in the afterlife. This world… this world is hell. We’re sent here to learn our lesson. Until we do, we’ll be reincarnated — over and over — into beings of pain and slavery.”
“And how exactly did you plan on learning that lesson?”
“I… I don’t know,” Ivy admitted. “God will tell me.”
“And how do you talk to God?”
“I don’t. I’m waiting for Him to talk to me. And I live by His rules.”
“Hang on a minute… do you have *any* idea how absurd that sounds to a spirit? We’re here. We sleep in pipes, under beds, in rabbit holes, behind silenced songs. And all you have to do is *call* us. You call, we come. It’s simple. We listen. We breathe colorful fire and dance for hours to bring fullness to your lives. And what do you do? You sit on your butt all day and… wait. For God Himself. Has anyone ever thought about *actually doing something*?”
“Well, yes… we rebelled, we started revolutions. But it never ends well. So, you start thinking… maybe I should try finding God again…”
“Okay. And where are you going to find Him?”
“In my heart,” Ivy said.
The blue ghost burst out laughing.
“Ha! In your heart! That’s rich. You’re funny — I like that.”
“I don’t see what’s so funny…” Ivy frowned, insulted.
“It’s funny because there’s a spirit riding you, and you don’t even know it. Your spiritual life is hidden from you. All you’re given is this cowardly little religious tale of suffering and apathy. You cling to the idea of the afterlife, but you’ve abandoned the living spirits who walk this Earth. There’s life, Ivy. Right here. Right now.”
“Spirits don’t exist!” Ivy snapped.
“Right… and yet you’re standing here, talking to one,” the ghost replied. “While you sit around waiting, your great rulers summon spirits, strap horns to their heads, and dance around fires of gold. While you’re frozen in alienation… they chant, *As above, so below*.”
“You’re a very confusing ghost,” Ivy muttered, shaking her head.
“The thing is… the spirituality you talk about is only half the truth. You know the afterlife. But the other half — this life — that’s hidden behind the red curtains of the privileged. Your distant, unreachable God… even when you think He’s close… He’s so far removed from most of you, this world truly *has* become the hell you talk about. See, if your spiritual life is only faith without action and your spiritual learning is only religion without philosophy… you’ve only got half the puzzle. Religion without philosophy is dogma. Faith without magick is a corpse. You want to open your mind? Study philosophy. You want to raise your spirit? Learn magick.”
“But that’s so primitive and ridiculous,” Ivy retorted.

“Let me explain. In 1118, a special order was formed: the Knights of Christ. A powerful organization of bankers and merchants, known for their wealth — or more precisely, their skill in acquiring it. The Templars. Their mission? Guard the Holy Grail. Now, there are plenty of theories about what the Grail actually is. Traditionally, it’s the cup Jesus drank from at the Last Supper. Some say it’s a Judeo-Christian treasure — in other words, money. Dan Brown once tripped on too much LSD and declared it’s the secret bloodline of Jesus. But we spirits… we’ve been wandering this Earth for nearly 9,000 years. We’ve had time to develop our own theory.

Of course, the cup plays a part. Many claim — though I haven’t witnessed it myself — that Jesus and the apostles performed a ritual during the Last Supper. They drank the blood of sacrificed animals. They were the first to understand: magick and faith must unite. Magick without faith wastes energy. Faith without magick is emptiness. Together, they merge spirit and matter, man and God, beast and divine. That’s the true meaning of ‘as above, so below’ — and vice versa.

The Holy Grail is the secret of the original Judeo-Christian religion. Even today, modern Grail keepers guard that secret fiercely. This ancient religion resembles what you practice today — but it hides something far deeper. Yes, there’s life after death. Yes, the soul leaves the decaying body. Of course, there’s a Creator. But there are other deities. There are spirits walking among you, spirits you can contact through ritual magick rooted in true faith. And once you do… they can grant countless desires — power your religious leaders couldn’t even imagine.

The Holy Grail *is* that ancient secret — a way to touch the divine. Knowledge that offers salvation and blessings, not only in the afterlife… but in this one.”

“Sounds incredible,” Ivy admitted.

“Your skepticism is stubborn,” the ghost smirked. “But there’s one problem with today’s Templars. To them, wealth *is* wisdom. They worship intelligence and science — which isn’t bad, except they’ve stripped them of empathy. Their motto? ‘Get rich, no matter what.’ Lie, deceive — as long as it makes money, it’s worth more than the truth drowning in debt. In their eyes, there are slaves and slave owners. That’s the ‘natural order.’ Women? Not so popular among them. Their supreme deity, Baphomet — the rider of the suffering — is hermaphroditic. Both male and female. They believe a man can become a woman — temporarily. But a woman? She lacks the tools to become a man. In their world, women are for fertilization. The only goddesses they honor are goddesses of fertility.”

“That’s cruel,” Ivy said. “Why do spirits work for such beings?”

“Because humans speak to gods through the spirits of the dead. The dead are supposed to help the living and, by doing so, prove they’ve been cleansed of evil. Only pure souls cross the river separating the living from the dead. Until then, they wander the Earth — restless, impure… easy prey for corrupted purposes.”

“And where are the good spirits?” Ivy asked.
“They’re waiting to be called. But you people don’t call them — cowards that you are. And when you *do* call them, your wishes are selfish and pathetic. And don’t even get me started on how naïve they are… the majority of spells? Love spells. Just to attract one… single… man. Hilarious.”
“So what — you’re saying we should all become like the modern Templars? Hungry for power, destroying lives, worshipping wealth? The spirits will turn on them. They’ll demand payment for everything they've given,” Ivy argued.
“There are other ways to reach the spirits — not just the Grail. In the East, there’s Vlach magick. Vlach witches, with burning coals in their palms and grave dust in their eyes, mixing ancient magick with Orthodox Christianity. A potent cocktail of crosses and bloody pagan horns. They know the ancient secret…” the ghost whispered.
“And in the West?” Ivy asked.
“In the West, black Africa’s spirit hides beneath Haiti’s vibrant attire. Voodoo.”
“Voodoo magick?” Ivy was taken aback. “They believe in zombies!”
“Voodoo’s more than that. It’s a dazzling mix of color, scent, and thought — a path to spiritual power. A way to return to the masters what they’ve given you: suffering. *As above, so below*, remember?”
“But that’s dangerous!” Ivy exclaimed.
“Only to those with blood on their hands. And to cowards and fools,” the ghost replied.
He checked his watch, cursed under his breath, and grabbed the pipe. “Shit, look at the time! Gotta get back.”
Before Ivy could react, he grabbed his right foot, pulled himself into the pipe, and vanished.
“But wait, how will I—” Ivy began, but it was too late. He was gone.
After that night, Ivy Gertra often smoked DMT — but the blue spirit never returned. Instead, Baphomet sat on her neck once more.
It was August 7th, 2017. The rain had stopped. The drought was unbearable. The entire northern hemisphere was ablaze. Temperatures soared past 45°C. Ivy decided to ask the spirits for help.
She built an altar: two silver candlesticks with white candles, two old filigree spoons adorned with rubies and emeralds, and three goblets — one filled with myrrh, one with water, and one with van van oil. A bottle of cherry brandy stood beside a lavish silver necklace and a freshly lit incense stick. At the base of the altar, proud goat horns pointed skyward.
Ivy sat before it, trembling. Her eyes glowed. Her face turned pale — nearly transparent, like ice.
She scribbled a note:

"Holy Loa Hudu, brother, do something — don't be an asshole. I know climate change is our fault, but calm down this damn Sun. This country's a filthy toilet. Our elite? Just shit floating in it. I'd shoot them all, but they'd just splatter and make it worse. You, dude, probably know how to handle crap — turn them into fertilizer or something. And shut down all the TVs — especially those shows about celebrities screwing, marrying, divorcing. I can't look at Adele any more. Or Beyoncé. Or Justin Bieber… damn… Justin Bieber. So… yeah. Amen."

She rolled the note into a straw, laid out a line of cocaine on the altar, snorted it, and began to dance with the spirits.

Five colors. Fifteen eyes. They danced with her to the rhythm of African drums. She danced until dawn, collapsed from exhaustion, and Pink Floyd's ballads replaced the pounding beats.

Naked, smeared with incense and cedar oil, she opened the window to greet the morning.

And what she saw left her speechless.

August 8th, 2017, 5:23 AM — it was snowing.

Ivy Gertra thought, *Loa Hudu really is a cool dude*.

The snow kept falling for three days. The evil spirit vanished from Ivy's neck. The radio stopped playing bad music. And then — the unthinkable happened. What was down rose up. What was up fell down. The face of the Earth changed completely.

The time of freedom had come.

As for Ivy? Her efforts went unrewarded. Ivy Gertra ended up in a psychiatric hospital, claiming she had summoned the snow.

The doctors gave her a mocking nickname — one that stuck for years.

They called her The Snow Queen.

Sleeping Beauty

"Dying, sleeping — that's all dying is —
A sleep that ends all the heartache
And shocks that life on earth gives us —
That's an achievement to wish for."
Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

Mornings are the worst.

Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday. Waking up is difficult, tedious, empty. It feels like waking up in hell. And waking up in hell is exactly like waking up in a place you don't belong — a place where time devours itself.

Every morning is the same. Black and heavy, wrapped in the ominous, misty cloud of an approaching future. Every morning is the same — except, of course, Sunday morning.

It was Sunday, August 27th, 2017, exactly 9 a.m.

"Good morning!" Prince Philip was yelling as his wet kiss landed on my cheek.

I woke up, staring at his distorted face, his snot smeared across mine, while I was in no mood for company. I tried to piece together the events of last night. I remembered us playing poker. I was running out of money, so I offered my body as collateral to Philip. He won. We smoked crystal meth and went to my place. We didn't have any condoms. Oh, how wonderful. This desperate, soulless, missionary fucking on meth will probably result in some dumb consequence that itches. *C'est la vie.*

My name is Rose. Unlike Prince Philip — currently looming over me, suffocating me with his presence — I've never been rich. I worked for everything I have. I've bled for the money I own. It's not much, but enough to call myself upper-middle class. And now, instead of feeling settled and calm, instead of planning a family, all I'm planning are new ways to kill boredom and fight off the seductive desire for the eternal slumber of a living corpse.

I look at Prince Philip: handsome, young, rich, desirable. Son of respectable parents with a hereditary place at court. Five years ago, I was madly, maniacally in love with him. Why? I don't know. Probably because I wanted to escape my previous life. Philip had several estates and fifty grand in cash — and that alone was the reason why, in our fairy tale, the princess fell for the prince. But it wasn't just about money. It was a desperate cry for salvation from the modern world and all its grotesque manifestations.

My story began exactly five years ago, when Prince Philip pushed me away and I lost all hope of doing the job I love or living freely. I was working at the court as a telephone operator.

I should explain. I live in a country called the Far Away Kingdom, ruled by King Stephan. It's a modern, parliamentary monarchy. Unfortunately, unemployment and poverty are rampant, and the only way to survive is to kiss the asses of the Lords of the Far Away Kingdom — sometimes even King Stephan's — just to stay afloat in the

brutal marketplace of business, politics, and human flesh. While ordinary people fight each other to survive, the Lords steal the people's gold, hide it under mattresses, sew it into pillows, and stuff it beneath their carpets. Once they've hoarded enough, they offer most of it to King Stephan, but always keep a little for themselves. They do it secretly, of course — if the King found out, he'd throw them out of court and punish them severely.

The story of the gold is strange. When King Stephan plucked me from the gutter five years ago and brought me to court, I couldn't understand why anyone would care so much about pointless golden rocks that serve no practical purpose. Then I found out. King Stephan donates most of the gold as a sacrifice to the Great Pharaoh, ruler of the world. The Great Pharaoh isn't human. He doesn't even care for gold as such. He feeds on human suffering. The more stolen wealth the Pharaoh collects, the more people starve — their suffering becomes his feast, their tears his delicacy.

There's another peculiar thing. In the Far Away Kingdom, the Court is privileged. The ordinary people live in destitution. But Pharaoh demands suffering from the court too. So, he divides us into two groups: the authorities and the servants. Naturally, I belong to the servants.

Servants must obey all orders from the Lords. We are expected to behave like robots: silent, humble, militarily obedient. During working hours — often extended — a servant must be flawless. No whims, no creativity, no eccentricities. In short, it is forbidden to be anything but painfully average. Even fantasizing is impossible in the Far Away Kingdom.

The authorities, far fewer in number, handle the gold sacrificed to the Pharaoh. They're allowed to do as they please. But to maintain the monarchy's respectable fasade, their indulgences are divided into public and private. Alcohol and tame scandals happen in the open. Drugs and sex remain behind closed doors.

Still, servants are better off than ordinary people. We earn more. Sometimes, we're even allowed to attend court parties — on one condition: if a servant wants to party, they must be ready to serve at a moment's notice. Everything was soulless and dull. The court's autocracy had drained all imagination. Servants were little more than upgraded slaves, too blinded by the golden sheen to notice.

But in truth, we were all servants. The only difference between the aristocracy and ordinary folk was that the aristocracy hadn't yet lost the will to make love and burn with passion. Unlike the modern world, the court still clung to the tradition that male genitalia should meet female genitalia — despite the easy lure of internet porn.

Sadly, their version of sex was no better than *Philiposex* — socially acceptable, unimaginative, dreadfully predictable. Driven by some misguided belief that sex is a numbers game, courtiers measured quality by quantity. It remains a mystery how

repeating the same dull act could ever make it exciting. But, like fools, they kept trying, expecting different results.

Indeed, the Far Away Kingdom is nothing more than a land of ignorance, cruelty, and bad sex. Our existence is defined by a lack of imagination. Bereft of creative intelligence, we stumble into the money race like headless chickens. We fill the void with gallons of whiskey — which isn't even whiskey, but brandy, though no one notices the difference.

In these conditions, I became obsessed with the idea of joining the authorities — at all costs. It was hunger for power. It burned inside me for three years as a servant until, one day, I stood up, furious. Bitterness filled my soul, and I swore I would never serve again. It was a magical moment. I looked into the cracked mirror and saw my own insanity: the filthy desire for power growing inside me.

I had the Cleopatra Syndrome. From my little Egyptian desert, I gazed at magnificent Rome, aching for it with all the longing in my being.

But one thing remained unclear: where was the power? What was it? Unlike the common belief, power wasn't just money. Prince Philip had money, yet he was ridiculous. Power is intangible, extraterrestrial — you simply feel it, watching those who stand near the golden throne. While other women dreamed of white wedding dresses, I dreamed of well-paid sex in a hotel room with the very embodiment of power — the key to my magnificent Rome.

But Nero had already burned Rome, and I was never Cleopatra. I was, at best, a fool. Besides, to be Cleopatra, I'd need to be beautiful — which I wasn't. And, as all connoisseurs of illusion know, the *background* matters. Like stock photography — a bikini-clad woman surrounded by palm trees sparks desire. Surrounded by snow? Mockery. My background was cheap and unappetizing. You can't lure power into a maid's moldy attic room. But what can you do when that's all you've got?

Luckily, the entire kingdom wasn't much better than my room. The embodiment of power in the Far Away Kingdom is no god or Roman emperor.

Here, everything I fantasized about was a witty caricature. A poorly Photoshopped image. The backdrop: a shabby room in the "O'Hara Inn." Our Caesar? A shady businessman praying every night that the King's Dobermans don't send him back to the mud. Our Cleopatra? She's got belly fat, cheap acrylic nails, a push-up bra branded "Mao Ling Chi." The only donkey milk she's seen is in an *Avon* brochure from a co-worker who sells cosmetics, fake jewelry, and life insurance on the side.

In our illusion, Caesar the conqueror probably has a scar from an appendix surgery he whined about for weeks while his wife spoon-fed him chicken soup. What a mighty Roman Empire!

You know when something is so distorted that you think, *Well, why not?* That was me. Restless and full of expectation, I entered the castle for the afternoon party. I ordered a

small glass of brandy and observed my surroundings. The Gothic royal ornaments hanging from the high ceilings gave the court an air of ancient magnificence — ruined only by cheap gentlemen, even cheaper ladies, and a strange modern sign above the entrance. Written in bold red and yellow letters:

"Welcome to the Machine."

I sat and observed in silence. Nothing impresses a true gentleman more than quiet, female mystery. But these weren't true gentlemen. This was a childish feast of vices. Though the caste system kept higher men away from lower women in daily life, at court parties — anything went. The Grand Duke, normally untouchable, drunkenly placed a hand on my knee after two liters of wine and began flirting openly.

The next day, I went to the Grand Duke's chamber, thinking one word would start the game — maybe even silence would do. After all, once the idea of sex ignites, words become irrelevant. But, despite being fifteen years my senior, the Duke didn't understand the game. I sat across from him in the chair of shame while our Caesar blushed, babbled, and panicked, desperate to refuse what I was offering. And he did refuse — faster than a frightened rabbit.

But it wasn't personal. He wanted harmless flirting, not the real thing. Verbal sex. Some playful teasing. But instead of sweet flirting, his verbal foreplay soured into a bitter, predictable comment: women are strange, undisciplined creatures — impossible to handle, both in business and private life. Uncontrollable, talkative, emotional, simple-minded dragons. His words — my Caesar had spoken.

Thus, my hero, the Grand Duke, drank his mint tea and ran from the dangerous, threatening creature between a woman's legs. After that, I was done with all of them. Done with the Kingdom.

And so, I crawled back to Prince Philip. Don't get me wrong: apart from his hatred for sex, Philip was fine. Intelligent, insecure, a bit aggressive. Tall, slim, dark-haired, with tiny dark eyes. Prone to drugs and alcohol, yet still a calm, good boy — if you ignore the hypocrisy. After meth, brandy, and sex, he'd rush home for tea with dear Lady Mary at precisely 5 p.m., whispering sweet nothings. Yes, Philip was fine — if you overlook the fact he's a living insult to aristocracy itself. The kind of aristocracy that makes you root for socialism and sharpen the guillotine.

It was Sunday, August 27th, 2017, 9:30 a.m. I stared at my reflection, then at Prince Philip. Where was I? He sipped black coffee, lit his pipe with weed. I was still a servant. I hated every morning that reminded me I was still alive — still stuck here. I gave my youth, my passion, my life to this Kingdom, and what did I get? They're cutting my salary. Cutting expenses. Squeezing the life from me for profit, for gold, for human suffering — to feed the Great Pharaoh.

I banged my head against the wall. Philip went to the bathroom. Philip peed. *Save me, Prince,* I thought. *Save me from the Kings, the Lords, the Dukes, the Pharaoh.* But

Philip kept peeing. He wrote his name in the toilet bowl with his urine. He emerged without lowering the seat.
"This weed... that's some crazy shit, I tell ya."
I didn't respond. Philip was one of them. He wouldn't save me. My life was a reality show with no way out — *Keeping Up with the Fucking Kardashians,* and I'm the only worker among them.
I told Philip I had an important business meeting and nearly shoved him out the door. He didn't care.
"Call me when you catch some time," he said, kissing me lightly.
As soon as I got rid of Philip and his *Philiposex*, I started eating. Recreational drugs always did that to me — two weeks of uncontrollable overeating, trying to fill the emptiness of my soul. A dumb, terrible habit. But I barely had enough strength to wash my face these days.
I threw on a sweater over my pajamas and went to buy cigarettes, my hair bundled into an aesthetic disaster. Slippers on my feet — the kind even court ladies wouldn't wear to the piggery. But in truth, the Far Away Kingdom was a piggery.
I waited half an hour for a pack of Marlboros. The Lords were throwing another party, buying alcohol by the hectoliter, clogging the checkout line. One of them graciously grabbed my hand, inviting me to an open-air party in the woods at six.
The only good thing about the Far Away Kingdom? The richest and poorest partied the same way. I agreed to come — then changed my mind. At a quarter to six, I climbed into a carriage and told the coachman to drive far, far from the palace. As far as the horses could run.
We stopped by the rocky ocean coast. I got out and sat on the cliff. Everything was dead. Even the water had no pulse — no scent, no rhythm. It wasn't standing still. It was retreating. I was sinking, drowning in failure. Everything dragged me back — to the mud, the horror of compromise. I realized neither King nor Duke were people — they were institutions. You can't seduce an institution. You kneel before it. You accept your Stockholm Syndrome. If you seduce the man behind the title, he loses the title — and who wants just the man? An ordinary man can't help you in a world where even God barely can.
The ordinary man? Worse than the institution. He doesn't fight — he serves. He lives the life he *must*, not the life he *can*. There's nothing worse than a man who surrendered. The one must fight to the death — for heaven, to madness, to hell and eternity.
That was the last cry of the fighter in me. I was the last soldier of light, now surrendered. My fantasy of a great conqueror vanished like Marlboro smoke. Like justice before emperors. Like money in the Lords' pockets. Like the Grand Duke after his mint tea.
I returned to the city.

And what did I find? Far Away Kingdom burned to the ground. One of the King's Lords dropped a cigarette in the dry leaves, and the whole forest ignited. The fire spread to the kingdom. The Grand Duke and his team tried to fight it — and were consumed. Those who ran for their money burned with it. Those with nothing to run for burned in the woods. The great castle, built over centuries, gone.

Only a music player, dangling from a charred pine, kept playing —

"The drops from the rim are now falling on the rope and the wreck,
I am free,
And the silk scarf is hanging from my neck,
Catching the wind..."

I wept for the lost court. For what? An institution trying to kill time itself? For Philip, for *Philiposex*, for meth? For the gold they devoured like parasites? No.

I wept for the country. For what it could've been. Maybe — just maybe — a new order would've risen from the ashes. One that still stole, but let tradition breathe. Or maybe I'm delusional. Maybe the meth's still in my head. The *dope of the reign*. Or maybe it's that LSD with Cleopatra, delirious, swallowing Caesar's sword.

I took all the unburned pills I could find, entered the castle's main hall, and sat on the throne — touching what had always been beyond me. The cold symbol of power lay beneath my feet, blackened with ash.

Its coldness was so calming.

Well, that's it.

The damage is done. There's no going back.

Now, all that's left is to sleep — sleep for a hundred years. Sleep until eternity.

Peter Pan

"Train 455 is arriving at platform 7," the announcement echoed.

The train doors slid open. I took a deep breath. The sharp scent of the ocean mixed with the tang of boat paint filled my nostrils. I looked at the wild forest surrounding the station. Like Christmas tree decorations, restless fairies glittered all over the treetops, giggling and teasing one another.

I stepped off the platform stairs and onto the ground of the Independent Country of Neverland.

The beauty of this land contrasted sharply with the wild spirit that clung to its newly formed civilization. Neverland was the homeland of Peter Pan, a famous writer who, at nineteen, penned his brilliant novel *Growing Up and Death for Dummies*. At twenty, young Peter died, and the public never got the chance to meet him. His novel was published posthumously by an anonymous figure—an enigmatic outcast who now lives in Neverland.

My name is Pete K. I'm a journalist for *Sunshine*, a magazine about pop culture and celebrity life. I had secured the exclusive right to interview the mysterious person who once knew the elusive and extraordinary Peter Pan.

It was late afternoon, the sun slowly fading, when I stepped onto the creaking floorboards of a shabby wooden cabin. I was overwhelmed with a mixture of fear and excitement, unsure of what to expect from the man waiting for me inside. I pictured a gentleman with a top hat, an engraved cigarette case, and a glass of wine from 1989 held in a delicate crystal goblet.

The floor creaked beneath my feet—the cabin was old and weather-beaten. The narrow hall was empty, humble. Suddenly, a rough voice growled:

"Come in."

I obeyed, stepping into the room.

I froze. The figure waiting for me was something I couldn't have imagined, not even in my wildest dreams.

A gray Canadian wolf, strong and muscular, stood upright on two legs, dressed in a black suit.

"Don't be scared," he said, "I'm just an old wolf-man."

With careful, deliberate movements, he poured us both some whiskey, leaning on a walking stick. Then he offered me a cigarette from a metal case, engraved with a sickle and hammer. Lighting his cigarette, the old wolf exhaled smoke and spoke:

"I tried, you know. I tried — and I failed. I'm remembered as the bad guy. But honestly… I never even met Red Riding Hood. I never knew the goat or her seven little ones. The goat? She was eaten by a man, you know… A shepherd. And the girl in the red hood? She suffered more because of *humans*. Humans have done more damage than wolves or any other beast ever could."

I wasn't entirely sure what he was rambling about.
"My pack…" He continued, rolling another cigarette. "We believed in something. Maybe we were wrong — you can see that now. We didn't even know exactly what we were fighting against. But the enemy… oh, they were powerful. And we failed. But defeat? Defeat is only the beginning of victory."
"How did you meet Peter Pan?" I asked.
"Ah, little Peter…" The wolf smiled faintly. "We worked together at an auto factory. Two dollars an hour. He wrote at night. His manuscript, *Growing Up and Death for Dummies*, was rejected by forty-four publishers. I doubt they even read it. Who cares about the words of a poor factory boy?"
"So eventually… did the forty-fifth publisher read it?" I asked.
"Nobody." He grinned. "I did. It took some convincing — he thought letting me read it would be a waste of time. They'd convinced him of that. But I'm an old wolf. It didn't take me long to understand the problem with his book. You see, Pete… people want to believe that poverty is the poor man's fault. The truth? Poverty spreads like a plague across entire nations. But if people accepted that, it would shake the foundations of their precious American dream. So they work… chasing a better tomorrow that never comes. They believe in fame, in fortune, in their 'five minutes.' They spend their lives building someone else's empire, saving scraps from their miserable wages, hoping someday they'll become *that someone else*. But that 'someone else'? That 'someday'? They never arrive. And the system remains intact."
The wolf coughed from the rough tobacco and continued:
"Peter's book—*that* shook the foundations."
He paused, leaning back in his chair.
"It was a Friday, I think. I'd just finished reading his manuscript. I turned on the radio. That old song came on… 'It didn't have to be better, to be the first or the hundredth…' You know the one. A guy gets dumped, watches porn, and realizes he's got nothing to prove to anyone."
"And what does that have to do with Peter?" I interrupted.
"That's when it hit me — e-publishing! No need to prove anything to anyone." He laughed.
"Interesting…" I yawned. In my head, I was already thinking about how to salvage this story. My editor would toss it the second he read about a poor boy and his wolf friend. A talking wolf? Maybe intriguing—but not enough for tabloid readers. They crave sex, cocaine, nightclubs. And so does the editor. A circulation of twenty thousand copies? That's forty grand… and the editor loves his forty grand — times two.
"Tell me the full story, Mr. Wolf. How did you really meet Peter?" I pressed.
"Like I said, Peter worked in the factory with me and my pack. He was eighteen when he got hired. No money for college. No prospects. Just young, naive, and eager for life.

But the factory manager… Marianne Sisi… she was like a colonial ruler. A sadist, not a leader. Black, burned hair like a witch's broom. Every Monday, she'd go to the city's top makeup artist. Every Friday, the hairdresser. But nothing could tame her hair—or her cruelty. She thrived on the suffering of her workers. Especially the young ones, like Peter."

He shook his head.

"Those jobs… hellish, even for old outcasts like us wolves. And for Peter? His spirit, his hope, the spark in his eyes… it all rotted away in that factory, soaked in oil and petroleum stench. After two years, I saw him sinking—slowly, irreversibly. So, I approached him. Told him we were planning a rebellion. He was terrified. But he didn't betray us."

The wolf's eyes glinted as he recalled the moment.

"Two days later, we stood outside the factory gates, chanting against Marianne Sisi's reign of terror. They came for us—beat us down. Sisi watched from the balcony, her throne of power. The wind ripped the red scarf from her head—the only time I ever saw fear in her eyes. Blood, pain, suffering—those didn't faze her. But the wind? Threatening her perfect hair? That rattled her."

He chuckled darkly.

"I snatched the muddy scarf from the ground, stuffed it in my pocket, and we escaped to the forest. Exiles, but free. I turned her red scarf into a flag—the symbol of her fear. And in less than two months, Peter joined us. Eighteen and a half."

The wolf lit another cigarette, his eyes distant.

"Peter was quiet. The only human among wolves. It was like each word cost him a year of life. But he adapted. One night, I caught him crying. He handed me his rejected manuscript, said there was no escape. I laughed bitterly. 'There's no escape for any of us,' I told him."

His voice dropped to a near whisper.

"That night, I read his first chapter. It hit me hard. I left my den, looked up at the moon—huge, glowing like a divine eye. The night was silky white. The air smelled of autumn. I howled. A deep, bitter song of injustice. My pack joined in. No words—just the anthem of the condemned. We knew… we'd be branded criminals, traitors, idlers. We expected death. But the lies… those hurt most. We knew when we fell silent for good, only Peter's book would tell the truth."

The wolf fell quiet for a moment.

"I told Blackie, our leader, we had to publish Peter's book. He was suspicious."

"Are you sure he's not a spy?" Blackie asked.

"Why would he be?"

"He's different. A stranger."

"Different how? He suffers like us."

“We’re black. He’s… gray. We have fur. His skin is smooth. Our eyes are wine-red. His are blue.”
I realized many in the pack felt the same. Peter didn’t belong. He knew it. But it didn’t matter—because deep down, Peter knew he was already dead.
Unlike others, Peter never clung to hope. He never grew up. But at nineteen, he was already old. He died few days after his twentieth birthday.
The wolf sighed.
“I couldn’t find peace in the pack. Our society was broken. I was strong enough to endure, but others… others weren’t. Marianne Sisi won in the end. We were fools. And I was too old to fight again. So I ran to Neverland. Escaped. But at least… I published Peter’s book. That’s something, right?”
The old wolf exhaled smoke and offered me more whiskey.
“Don’t be offended,” I said, “but your story… it won’t interest our readers.”
“Maybe your readers aren’t interesting to *our* story,” he retorted.
“In the era of money…” I began.
“There it is—the era of money. That’s the disease. You all loved money so much… you killed Peter.”
“How could we have killed Peter?” I frowned.
“Easily. You killed the Peter inside you.” He smiled coldly.
I had no response.
“Peter’s gone, Pete. But there’s still a wolf inside you. A black god who hates injustice. Wake him up.”
His glowing eyes burned with fury. Fear prickled down my spine.
“Sir… all I want is to boost *Sunshine*’s sales,” I said, trying to sound calm.
“Then I won’t waste your time,” the wolf replied, seeing me to the door.
I left in a hurry. My heart raced as I ran far from that cabin. How had I ended up here? Traveling to a country at the edge of the world, listening to a talking wolf, wasting my day with no decent material for my article!
“Find the wolf inside you… blah blah… what bullshit!” I muttered, angrily kicking trash along the road.
Then I saw her—a blonde girl, arguing with her own shadow.
“What…?”
“Good afternoon, sir!” she greeted brightly. “I’m Wendy.”
“What… are you doing?”
“Arguing with my shadow. Sometimes, you have to hear what your shadow has to say.”
“How…?”
“Just like that. Shadows are like wolves.”
“Meaning?”
“Not all shadows are bad. It’s useful to hear the other side.”

“That makes no sense!” I snapped.
“Depends. If your goal is money, sure, it doesn’t. But if your goal is to stop craving money… it does.”
“I don’t even have a goal now!” I exclaimed.
“Even better, isn’t it?”
Her shadow laughed at me—mocking, sneering.
I bolted for the station, desperate to escape this madhouse called the Independent Country of Neverland.
And then I woke up.
What a twisted dream.
Stress, I told myself. Deadlines. Bad drugs. City life crushing me. Too many drugs, not enough sex. I had to get out of this room. Four years of constant chasing. My head was ready to explode.
I grabbed my jacket, checked my pockets.
Phone? Check.
Cigarettes? Check.
Condoms? Check.
Ecstasy? Check.
Cash? Check.
All there. I opened the door and stepped out.
That’s when I realized—the one thing I forgot…
My shadow.

"Man is a political whore."
— Aristotle
"Sorry, whores, he didn't mean to insult you."
— Fyodor Dostoevsky

"Look at her! Who is she, Marco?" the Queen said, pushing the curtain aside and glaring out the window.
"Snow White, Your Majesty. No one important," replied Marco, a servant and member of the State Security Service.
"She's young… she's gorgeous," the Queen muttered.
"But nothing special."
"Charming though, from what I've heard."
"A little. But nothing that threatens you. She's not beautiful enough to pose a threat to you. She doesn't even have the ambition to be a threat."
"She doesn't have any ambition *yet*," said the Queen. "But ambition isn't necessary. Fate imposes itself. There are only two things a woman needs to know to rule. The first: secrets must never, under any circumstances, be revealed — neither your own nor anyone else's. I believe she's already figured that out."
"And the second?" Marco asked.
"The second is: there is no queen without a king. She doesn't know that yet. But she'll learn soon enough."
"You're a queen without a king," Marco teased with a smile.
"Please," the Queen snapped, frowning. "Don't speak lightly of the late king. He was always a gentleman. If there was a lady present, she never had to stand. He would *always* offer his seat. Even if she was a peasant, he'd stand and give her his chair. I'll never forget the day he let Lady Mary rest her tired feet on his throne. A simple woman, sitting in the royal throne for an entire hour. Humiliating! But he was a gentleman — even at the cost of his own dignity.
"And then I came to court. And *I* was left standing. He sat upon his throne, gripping it as if his life depended on it, while I stood there — alone. I asked myself, what kind of man lets the most beautiful woman in the kingdom be the only one humiliated in his presence? And then I understood: the urge to defend one's territory is a man's strongest instinct.
"Territory. Power. Those are the deepest drives — not sex. I never doubted that. I knew he saw me as nothing but a threat to his beloved throne. I wanted to tell him he could piss all over that damn throne for all I cared, that I didn't need his crown or his power. I wanted to leave, to show I wouldn't tolerate any insult to my womanhood. But I didn't. That was the day I learned to control my anger — perfectly.

“By enduring that humiliation, I learned everything a queen must know. He saw me as a threat, and so he kept me close, under control. In small doses, he allowed me to taste the air of power — just enough to get me addicted. And the moment I craved more, he’d snatch it away.
“He knew from the start how weak I was… how weak any woman can be when it comes to male power. But one day… we were alone.”
“And?” Marco prompted, smiling with innocent curiosity.
“And… nothing!” the Queen exclaimed. “I called him a coward. A mouse, not a man! How can a mouse be king — or a god — to a woman like me? I rolled my eyes, yes, yes. He stood by the door, and I walked right up to him, my lips tight with fury, and demanded to leave. I told him: *‘You are not my king.’*”
“Anyone else would have been executed for that,” Marco observed.
“Anyone else, yes. But not a beautiful woman. Everyone surrenders to a beautiful woman — eventually. Of course, the king came to me, and we ended up in bed, drunk on passion. He couldn’t resist a beautiful woman. That’s why Snow White is dangerous.”
“But Your Majesty, she’s not as beautiful as you were! You were a goddess; she’s… ordinary.”
“That has nothing to do with it. Beauty isn’t measured or calculated. Beauty is simply… sufficient. It’s the *minimum*, the first condition. Beyond that, it’s the mind that matters.”
“Your Majesty, times have changed. It’s the age of greed. No one cares about sex any more. Beauty, intellect — they mean nothing. People care about money. Nothing else.”
“Marco, Marco… no one ever gets tired of sex.” The Queen laughed, then suddenly turned serious. “Did you say *‘times have changed’*? Compared to *what* time, exactly? Are you implying *my* time has passed? That I’m… old?”
“N-no, Your Majesty… I… no…” Marco stammered, his face pale with cold sweat.
An unpleasant silence filled the room. The Queen sighed.
“So… what are we going to do about Snow White?” Marco asked, desperate to change the subject.
“Kill her,” the Queen said flatly.
“Your Majesty! There’s no need for that!”
“Do you have a better idea, Marco?”
“Be diplomatic. Let others think differently. Even Snow White. Everything that has legitimacy can have legality. Let’s call it… opposition. Let her speak. Let her live. Let her be politically active. The moment five hundred and one man out of a thousand stand with her, *then* invite her for apple pie and negotiate.”
“Have you lost your mind, Marco?!” the Queen screamed.
“I always thought a system like that could work. You know… a new, post-Greek democracy.”

“I’ve never heard anything so stupid.” The Queen shifted the curtain aside again, watching Snow White. “Is that Damian with her?”
“Yes. Not the first time,” Marco replied.
“For God’s sake, he’s the head of State Security and he’s working *against* me! Call him!”
Within minutes, Damian — young, handsome, and impeccably dressed — stood before the Queen.
“Damian, dear Damian… I don’t even know what to say…” the Queen muttered, seething with fury.
“I haven’t done anything illegal,” Damian replied defensively.
“And Snow White? How long have you been parading around the kingdom with her? How long have you been sleeping with her? I found you a beautiful woman — was this circus really necessary?”
“He’s just having fun, Your Majesty,” Marco intervened.
“He’s not a boy, he’s an officer. Popular, too. Right, Damian? The people love you. They see you as a god, a rescuer. You ‘save’ them from me — the evil queen! That’s what they say, isn’t it? Yes, yes! Pretty Damian can make anyone popular just by appearing with them. And who does he walk with? *Her*!”
“It’s not my fault you have the reputation of an evil queen!” Damian shot back. “Everyone says you killed the king.”
“Killed the king?!” she gasped, horrified. “H-how? What are you talking about?”
“With apple pie,” Damian replied.
“Apple pie?!”
“Yes. With cyanide.”
“You people are insane!” the Queen shouted. “I loved the king! Everyone knows: there is no queen without a king. He carried that crown with pride. Any woman would have been honored to be his queen.”
“That’s hard to believe. Everyone says you have a perverse desire for beheading people,” Damian said coolly.
“Well, I’m a woman! Wanting to chop off someone’s head at least once a month is *normal*,” she joked.
No one laughed.
Another heavy silence.
“Allright, allright…” The Queen shook her head. “No executions. Take Snow White out of the kingdom. Give her a small estate. I don’t want to see her again. And *you*,” she pointed at Damian, “go home to your wife. Stay there.”
“Yes, Your Majesty,” Damian replied.
Marco and Damian bowed and left the court. Time for urgent business.

In the woods

“But Hunter, don’t leave me here!” Snow White pleaded, on her knees.

“It’s nothing personal, sweetheart. The Queen ordered me to exile you. I’m just following orders,” said the Hunter.

“But… call Damian!”

“Darling, he won’t come. Do you really think any man would sacrifice his golden throne for a farce like this?”

“But… I won’t survive…” she cried.

“Believe me, no one cares. Everyone’s responsible for their own survival. This is your land now. Farm it. Here — money for a few sheep. Guard them. Cultivate the land.”

He pointed at the barren, rock-hard soil. Snow White picked up a hoe, swung it feebly, and the tool slipped from her delicate hands. She collapsed, sobbing. The Hunter knew — the Queen had made a mistake. Hardship wouldn’t break Snow White. It would forge her into steel. One day, she’d return. And take the throne.

As he walked away, he saw her silhouette vanishing into the dark forest.

Snow White was having a panic attack. She stumbled into a pack of wolves. Horror was everywhere — in every sound, every shadow. The forest itself wanted to devour her.

“Awful… helplessness… Is there anything in this world more terrifying than you?” she sobbed.

The Colliery

Dawn. Through the fog, she saw a building. The gates were wide open. Above them:

"Colliery – The Institute for Youth and Adults."

She entered. Seven men worked inside a small workshop. A man in a wheelchair approached.

“Welcome to Colliery. Bedrooms are upstairs. Make yourself at home. I’m Kevin.”

“Snow White. Thank you for the hospitality.”

“No need for thanks. The Institute is open to anyone who needs help.”

Kevin showed her around. It was a recycling facility with bedrooms, sports fields, a TV room, and offices for doctors. The workers had only first names or nicknames — most had no idea where they came from or who their parents were. Snow White realized they were probably exiles like her.

Her new companions: Wacky, Kevin, Donald, Tourette, Napoleon, Nero… and Wanker.

Wanker didn’t shake her hand. He stared at the wall.

“What’s wrong with him?”

“Weird syndrome. He’s sensitive, can’t speak. Ignore him — just say ‘good morning’ every day at the same time. If you snap, the whole process resets. Oh — lock the bathroom. He’s… a serial masturbator.”

“Thanks,” Snow White sighed, tears returning.
Days passed. Snow White shared her story — the Queen, exile, cyanide pies. Even Wanker pitied her in his own way. It took a month before she asked Kevin why he was in a wheelchair.
“Suicide attempt,” he answered calmly, sipping cold coffee.
“Oh my God,” Snow White gasped.
“I’m in a madhouse!”
“We prefer to call it the Colliery Institute,” Kevin replied.
“Forget this. I’m leaving. Back to the kingdom.”
“Afraid?” Kevin asked.
“She put me in a madhouse. *She* should be afraid. My personal devil will haunt her.”
Her friends wept when she left. Even Wanker, in his own way, gave her a T-shirt:
"You can’t scare me. I’m from the Colliery."

Back in the Kingdom
White smoke rose — the symbol of a new king. The Queen was dead — suffocated by her own poisoned pie. Damian had seized the throne.
Snow White demanded an audience.
Seeing her, Damian nearly choked on his wine.
“You!”
“You killed her!”
“Good evening to you too, madam. I thought you *wanted* her dead.”
“Why didn’t you help me? You knew I’d never betray you. I just wanted to survive.”
“What do you want me to say?”
“The truth. Why?”
“Because I’m garbage. Is that what you wanted to hear?”
“And garbage deserves to be king?!”
“What else did you expect? In our world, the dumbest garbage becomes president — then rules the world.”
“You are not my king!”
She lunged, stabbing him until his final breath.
Guards swarmed. But Marco — now head of State Security — waved them off. They were alone. They talked for hours.
Two days later, white smoke. Snow White crowned queen.
The truth? Marco and Snow White had been lovers — co-conspirators — all along.
“We made it!” Snow White cried in his arms.
“I never doubted you,” Marco smiled. “You were born to win.”
“I feel… strange. Sad and happy at the same time…”
“Why, my Queen?”

“Couldn’t the world be… fairer?”
“It could be. But it isn’t.”
“And what do we leave for future generations? A legacy of cruelty? Wasn’t the point to build a better world?” Her eyes filled with tears.
“The lesson? The Emperor rules — until he angers the intelligent.”
“Maybe… we should rewrite this story. Call those brothers who write fairytales. Add a prince. A witch. Make it… classic. Let’s at least *try* to change the course of history.”
“Anything you want, my Queen. Just promise me one thing.”
“What’s that?”
“Promise me… we’ll never eat apple pies.”

Alice in Wonderland

"It was much pleasanter at home,' thought poor Alice,
'when one wasn't always growing larger and smaller,
and being ordered about by mice and rabbits.
I almost wish I hadn't gone down that rabbit-hole,
and yet - it's rather curious, you know, this sort of life!
When I used to read fairytales,
I fancied that kind of thing never happened,
and now here I am in the middle of one!"
Lewis Carrol, “Alice in Wonderland”

The snow had just started to fall, and the view through the balcony window was magical. The night was waking up, promising a long and windy weekend in idyllic peace. Alice poured red wine into two glasses. She handed one to her husband and took a modest sip from hers.

Unlike the typical fairy tale, Alice’s situation was a little different. Her husband wasn’t a prince—he was a rabbit. Still, he was unusually handsome, though tiny, and when he approached her from behind and touched her shoulders with his soft, gentle fingers, she felt like she didn’t need a prince. But then, his phone rang.

Her husband was a bank officer, and his flexible working hours were killing every breath of intimacy they both craved. The moment his phone rang, suggesting he had to return to work, Alice felt that familiar remorse. She couldn’t stop wondering why she hadn’t married someone else. One should marry a wolf, not a rabbit! But Alice had never received a proposal from a wolf—or a prince. Maybe she should’ve tried harder. Either way, it was too late to talk about it now. She shouldn’t dwell on it. What she needed was to make her husband stay home. To save at least that small spark between them that still had some life.

She grabbed his arm and begged, "Just tonight, darling, tell them your aunt is sick and you have to bring her medicine. Say you’re in Barcelona. Say you’re going to Alaska—to the edge of the world!"
He put on his top hat and wristwatch, looking like an important Wall Street broker, and muttered,
"Oh dear! Oh dear! I shall be too late!"

Alice thought she never should have married. If there’s no prince, and life isn’t calm or stress-free, what was the point?

"Why is my fairy tale different?!" she cried to Bella over the phone, sobbing as if a true catastrophe had struck.

"How should I know? You shouldn't have married a rabbit," Bella replied calmly, knowing full well there were worse destinies than hers—sitting alone in the Calandrian darkness, waiting for disaster.

"It doesn't matter who you marry. It's all bullshit!" Alice snapped. "Do you think he's cheating on me?"

"I don't know. Cheating takes courage. Your rabbit doesn't have the guts. But listen—I'm saying this with so much contempt and despair. Maybe to someone, he's a god. But not to you. You'll never find yourself in that marriage. You'll chase him, wrapped in paranoia and fake jealousy, looking for proof that he's cheating, when really, you're feeding your own hunger for adventure. A woman usually projects her own desires into the fantasy of his unfaithfulness. He's probably faithful. But the truth is worse than infidelity—he's empty. As a man, as a rabbit, as anything."

Bella was one of those brutally honest women no one really wants as a friend. Instead of soothing Alice with comforting lies about accepting her dull role in the world, Bella felt an irrepressible, almost philosophical urge to challenge everything.

The first step toward female degradation, some say, is the desire to change the rules society gave her. If she can't be happy under those rules, then *she's* the problem—not the rules. That's why, twenty years ago, even scientists claimed that 80% of women were frigid. Now, they say 80% of women can't succeed in male-dominated fields. One day you're too cold. The next, you're not cold enough.

Though Alice knew Bella tended to romanticize things, she still envied her—her beauty, her wit, her charm, all seemingly gifted without effort. Alice felt something she thought she'd never feel: the terrible sting of envy in female friendship. The hidden, hypocritical kind that keeps women from experiencing true companionship. When one woman sees another basking in sunlight, she doesn't see the sun—she sees what she *could have had* if only she'd been smarter, braver, prettier. If only she'd been someone else. If only she'd been Bella.

Nothing breeds despair like eagerness paired with helplessness. The role of the passive woman—sitting, waiting all day—plunged Alice into permanent impatience. Everything she used to enjoy felt boring, slow, worthless. Her rabbit-husband said she was just bored. She tried working more, but it only worsened. She wondered if others felt the same. "It's hard to believe in someone else's god," she thought. "But even harder to believe in your own."

Still, if you want to survive in a world built by the mental inquisition of the average, you must keep quiet. You must find ways to kill time, counting the days until nothingness.

Alice had been thinking about whether she should drink a bottle of whiskey or take psychedelic mushrooms—and finally decided: both. For the first half hour, she watched a sea turtle documentary, disappointed that the mix "wasn't doing the trick." She felt drowsy. But then, she noticed her husband had forgotten his gloves. "He must be freezing!" she thought. She grabbed the gloves and stepped into the snowstorm that suddenly didn't feel so magical any more.

* * *

"Where am I?" Alice wondered, falling down a dark tunnel surrounded by clocks.
"Bad trip. Fucking bad trip!"

But the longer she fell, the calmer she felt. Actually, it wasn't a fall. For a fall to exist, there must be a bottom. And if there's no bottom, then maybe—it's flying. Yes. Alice was flying. And it felt good. She thought she might fall asleep in this eternal descent when a hand grabbed her and pulled her into the ocean.

Only it wasn't a hand—it was a paw. A mouse clung to her in panic.
"What is this?" she asked.

"Your tears," came the reply. In the distance, she saw thousands of tiny animals drowning.

"Your tears are devouring us."

"But why?"

"Because we're small. If we were big, we'd have handkerchiefs to stop the crying. But we're small. So we drown."

A rat floating by in an improvised boat pointed at Alice.

"Everyone, attack her! It's her fault!"

The water withdrew, the animals climbed out, furious. They made a stake for Alice. The mouse lit it.

"I knew it!" the rat yelled. "She's guilty! Burn her!"

Alice ran.

Suddenly, a path appeared with a signpost:
"Mad Hatter's Tea Party → Go Left. Or Right. It Doesn't Matter."

* * *

The two very special guests were attending the Mad Hatter's tea party. Those were March Hare and Piglet. The Piglet was going left, March Hare was going right, but somehow they both ended up in the same place. And they've been here for twenty years, maybe even longer, maybe even half a century.
- What are we going to do today? - asked Mad Hatter while pouring whiskey into glasses.
- Let's piss on the poor! – shouted March Hare.
- I wanna go see some whores, oink. – said Piglet.
- Let's play ... stabbing! - said Mad Hatter.
- Well done! Stabbing! I love that game! -
- Oink, oink! -
- How do you play that game? - asked Alice.
- You need to take this... - The Mad Hatter was explaining it to her right after he took a pencil and stabbed it randomly into some sort of list - ...and you stab one name from the archive of the living creatures. Yeah, I got it ... I got it...Wait, let's see what it says.. aham, it says: A-d-a-m. -

Only a few moments after the Mad Hatter said his name, a handsome looking man appeared in front of him. His name was Adam.
- Where am I? - Asked Adam as he dusted himself off.
- We have called you. My name is Mad Hatter. These are March Hare and Piglet. – March Hare kindly waved, and Piglet oinked.
- Now, tell us Adam: what do you do for a living? -
- I'm a philosophy student, currently a taxi driver. –
- This is going to be interesting, oink! – said the Piglet.
- Come on, stab! – the March Hare shouted.
- Okay, Adam … - said the Mad Hatter and prepared his pencil. This time, he stabbed the pencil into another list. - Adam, it is written here that you need to be ... I'll stab it now, wait, wait ... Woooow, a mayor! The mayor of ... hmm ... uh ... let's see the city... oh, here it is! You should be the mayor of the Calandria city in Calandria state! -
- Perfect! Well done! - said March Hare.
- Oink! -
- But please! - Adam murmured. - How can I be such an important person? I don't know ... I can't do that. Where is Calandria anyway? How many inhabitants does it have? -

- Who cares! – laughed March Hare. - All you need to know is that there is an economic crisis in Calandria now, and when there is a crisis, it means there are many young, easy girls for the mayooooooor! -
- To the whores, oink! – the Piglet shouted.
- But, but ... I don't have a degree! I don't have a diploma! – said Adam, unsuccessfully trying to defend himself.
- No problem, we'll solve it right away. - Said Mad Hatter, and opened a bag full of paper. - What kind of diploma do you want? Economy? Here, an engineering! -
- But I don't know how to work with computers! - Adam complained again.
- It doesn't matter, you dumbass! – Mad Hatter laughed. - Piglet will give you a diploma right away. -
The Mad Hatter placed the diploma on the table, Piglet dips his snout into a plum jam and stamped the diploma with its sticky, purple snout.
- There you go, you have officially graduated! - Mad Hatter shouted and gave Adam the degree. - Why are you looking at me like I'm some kind of crazy? - asked Mad Hatter. He was suddenly quite annoyed. - Piglet has certified the diplomas with a plum jam since nineteen sixty-eight! -
- Since 1959, please! Oink! – Piglet corrected him.
- There you go, and where's the problem ?! – said the Mad Hatter with a sharp voice while threateningly looking at Adam. March Hare was already drunk: he was laughing and rolling under the table while roaring: - Send him to Calandria! I wanna see what's going to happen! -
- To the whores, oink! - Piglet said.
- But, how will I ... I don't understand ... Am I a member of a political party? Am I the left wing's or the right wing's representative? - Adam asked.
- Ughhh, man, it doesn't matter! Piglet was going to the left, March Hare was going to the right, and they all ended up sitting at the Mad Hatter's table! Whiskey? - Mad Hatter offered Adam a wide glass filled up to the top.
- He needs a suit, oink. - Piglet commented.
- Ha-ha, a suit, yes! - March Hare laughed while he was falling onto glasses, black out drunk. And, at the moment, they put Adam in a suit, put a tie on him, pushed the diploma into his hands and threw him into Calandria. The only thing he wanted to ask was: And what am I going to do theeeer... - but he couldn't even make it to say - ...e? - he was already teleported to Calandria.
- Who cares what he's going to do there! He's so dumb, he is going to do some good deeds! - said Mad Hatter.
- Oh, what a jackass! – drunk March Hare was giggling.
- What exactly was all this about?! - asked Alice. - Wasn't there supposed to be a voting for this? -

- Ooo, Miss-know-it-all wants to vote! - said March Hare.
- Voting, oink! -
- All right, all right, let the lady vote. - said Mad Hatter. - Okay, young lady, you can vote by answering with 'yes' or 'no'. Do you, Miss Alice, agree to participate in our game? -
- I cannot adequately vote by using only 'yes' or 'no'! - she protested.
- In that case, I'll put it this way: Do you, young lady, agree to vote by answering questions with 'yes' or 'no'? -
- No! - said Alice.
- Okay. Do you, young lady, think that the stabbing game should be played in this spot or do you think we all need to move one spot to the right? -
- But... what kind of farce is this? - she shouted. March Hare choked with laughter and Piglet oinked.
- You see, young lady - Piglet got serious - if you don't like our tea party, you can stand up and go! And we will, of course, go to the whorehouse. -

Alice suddenly felt dizzy and she seemed like Mad Hatter, March Hare and Piglet began to move away from her until they were completely out of her sight. She remembered that she had left home to bring gloves to her husband, the rabbit, but she had forgotten the most important thing – the gloves! She turned around and hurried home.

* * *

- Aha, there you are! - said Alice and grabbed gloves from the shelf. - But, what is this? -
A few more mushrooms were standing on the shelf next to the gloves, looking at Alice and laughing at her. She decided to take one more. But as soon as she swallowed it, she felt that she uncontrollably started to grow. Her hand was hanging from the window, her foot made its way through the door, and her head went straight up through the chimney. The house became too small for her.

- What are you doing, you crazy woman? – yelled her husband, the rabbit. - You want me to be late?! You want me to lose my head?! -

- I just came…to get ... your gloves! - she was trying to justify herself.

- Ugh, gloves! What are gloves compared to the head! - he yelled at her, and then angrily and urgently went back to the bank. Alice tried to tell him to wait for her. She wanted to run after him, but her head was stuck in the chimney. She was desperate. But then, she remembered - she had one more mushroom in her hand.

- This mushroom will definitely reduce my size. - she thought. Swallowing the mushroom, she felt that her limbs are returning to their normal size. When she managed to size down to somewhat below her usual dimensions, she flew out of the house like a hailstorm. She ran as fast as she could in order to follow her husband, but she only saw his silhouette.

- Aha, you birdie! - She whispered victoriously. - Now we'll see what you're up to! -
The rabbit was indeed going to the bank. Alice was disappointed for a moment, thinking that she must have gone crazy. Her husband didn't go to see another woman. He really went to work. But what if the other woman is in there, at work? The devil was dancing inside of her, so she went after the rabbit and stepped into the bank.

* * *

Above Alice's head stood a huge red sign on which was written:
"The Hertz Corporation".
The hall of the bank was long and scary. Thousands of people with top hats and wristwatches were rushing around without any order, uncontrollably repeating: - Oh, dear! Oh, dear! I shall be too late! I will not succeed! I'll lose my head! -
Papers were flying all over, people were crashing into one another while putting their legs in front of one another in order for the other to fall, the nerves were snapping. From time to time, an ambulance would come and take a man or animal gone mad from stress. Alice didn't understand who was threatening them with head cutting, but for a moment she felt like having your head cut off was certainly not so terrible if you compared it to life under such pressure.
Her husband, the rabbit, climbed up the stairs, heading towards the offices on the second floor. Alice thought that his mistress will surely be there and decided to follow him. But there was nothing up there that would be nearly as interesting as the rabbit's mistress. The rabbit entered the office and sat down on the lowest chair, apologizing for being late. At that moment one of the attendants said: - You must not be late, she will cut off your head! - A-ha, she! Who is she?
Alice was observing the situation throught the keyhole. In the office there were: a rat, who was obviously the head of the sector, and a mouse, who was his deputy. Among the subordinates, besides Alice's husband, there was a pink flamingo and a terrified elephant who was constantly trying to push his butt in the corner in order to stay imperceptible. The rat was giving orders while the mouse was nodding his head and blowing into the rat's tea to cool it down faster. The mouse handed some papers to the rat.
-Is anyone absent? - asked the rat.
- Just a cat. - his deputy muttered.

- Cut his head off! -
Mouse pulled a list from a small briefcase and put the cat on the guillotine list. - Six more lives and the cat is over! - he smiled as if he was completely pleased with the list. And yet, maybe he was glad. However, he is a mouse - it is quite clear that the natural superiority of the cat disturbs him and that he would be happy to eliminate him. Alice thought the mouse did not even inform the cat about this meeting, and that it was all a trick to eliminate him because of his natural superiority. To be completely honest, it was clear that the rat did not enjoy the cat's presence either, and was ready to play along.

As soon as the list of executions was taken out, the meeting became chaotic. The job was there, waiting, while the animals were arguing with each other who was guilty and screaming at each other ready for slaughtering among each other. The rat seemed to be satisfied with this unproductive horror among Hertz Corporation employees. The elephant's face had become green, and it seemed like he wanted to escape or explode. Then, someone's footsteps were heard. It was the sound of heels. It caused a scary silence among the employees. It was Queen Hertz herself.
Queen Hertz was a great CEO who has been using sex as a means to improve her career since she was twenty-six. She was a person without a soul, an empty bag of skin and bones with nothing human left in her. Queen Hertz was thirsty for blood and power only. Everyone was scared. More precisely, everybody's always frightened, but now she just gave them a reason to be scared. She's been working for a particularly important boss whom no one had ever seen. She was, obviously, the main head cutter in this branch of the "Hertz" corporation.

How terrible place is this place where the rabbit is employed! But, why do all these people endure this? Why don't all these people and animals rebel? There is only one Queen Hertz, and they are many. And yet, everyone is afraid of her. It's like they don't see their strength. They were shivering in fear of the few powerful people who have deemed themselves gods against everyone's will. And why? Has anyone in this corporation done anything useful in the past month? Did anyone grow food, build a building, invent some kind of innovation, improve human life? No, in this building papers are just being moved from one spot to another. People were busy doing nothing. In fear of getting their heads cut off, they are living a life that is worse than death, not knowing that it doesn't have to be that way.

Those thoughts took over Alice every time she would look at Queen Hertz. Looking at her, she only saw what she didn't want to become. She didn't even know if she was overwhelmed with horror, the selfishness or the power of the moment - she ran out of the Hertz corporation before she saw how everyone is playing by the Queen's rules. She could not silently observe such injustice. She was running and running like she wanted

to get away from the question that was haunting her: will her husband, the rabbit, remain alive today or will the Queen Hertz cut his head off because she doesn't like the color of his tie.
Running through the forest, she hit her head on a huge mushroom.
- Fuck, what a trip! – she mumbled determined not to take even a single bite of those damned psychedelic substances any more. And then, Alice looked up and realized this was not an ordinary mushroom. A cat was sitting on the mushroom and was laughing out loud.
- Ha-ha, you should have seen him! - The cat was chuckling. - Prince Philip ... ha-ha ...I've sold him some crystal meth, he paid a fortune. The stud wants to bring home some chicks. What a funny guy. You see, every fool can be a prince today. –
- It's not nice to laugh at people with special needs. – said Alice reproachfully.
- But it's nice to laugh at people who are constantly trying to be something they're not. -
- What kind of psychedelic mushrooms are these, you freak! They make me sick. I think I'm going to die! -
- Ah, this kind of mushroom shouldn't be mixed with alcohol, you silly little gluttonous girl! – the cat insulted. - Besides, if you don't like them ... -
He didn't even manage to finish the sentence when Alice fell to the ground and started crying. She was crying and sobbing like some kind of terrible catastrophe had happened.
- Everyone is so easily insulted here! - she yelled through tears. - And I don't know ... what to be ... I can no longer be anything. It's too late for me to be what is needed. -
- All right, there, there... calm down. – the cat said while trying to comfort her. - It couldn't be any different anyway. Whichever way you go, you end up at the Mad Hatter's tea party. -
- You don't understand ... - she cried.
-The Siamese cat-loser who is dealing drug doesn't understand? - The cat smiled. - What do you think, that I couldn't become something better? Fuck it, the mice and rats are ruling this place, and they would do anything just to get rid of me because they know what would have happened if they had played a fair game with me. They would disappear in one bite! But, in this place, the fate decides. You are being ordered around mice and rats, you never know if you're big or small and, in the mornings, you are waking up with one single motive: to keep your head on shoulders.
- Stupid life. And what if it was different? What if I didn't marry the rabbit? What if I had become Queen Hertz myself? What would change? When you are a woman, then you can't even become someone meaningful. -
- You can never become something or someone meaningful. And when it comes to your marriage, you should have married a wolf. Or a cat? – he smiled.

- I shouldn’t have gotten married at all! - She cried even harder, so hard that the sky started shaking.
- I was always convinced that life is a remorse. That's why I'm not bothered by things that much. I could have been the CEO of the Hertz corporation, if it weren’t for those mice and rats. Now, I'm a drug dealer. And so what? Nothing. It’s all the same. You earn money, you eat money. And you keep going in the same circle over and over again. -
- Everything is so fucked up ... –
- Come on, little girl, I'm taking you home ... - said the cat, holding her under his arm - it's just a bad trip ... just that. -

Alice didn’t fall asleep that night. The next day, when the rabbit came home from the bank, he found an empty apartment. The psychedelic trip had left something behind, it sowed its evil seeds and nothing could be the same any more. She had to leave. And she'll always leave. And nothing, nothing in this world will change her willingness to rush into the madness and magic, into the world of Wonderland and psychedelic mushrooms, into a ridiculous belief that meaninglessness can become something else only if you beat your head against the wall hard enough and strongly believe that it will break, although it never will.

Beauty and the Beast

“Let time pass by,
I will believe in the moments we are together,
When you look at me with all your strength
And return to my face that immortal beauty of a doll.”

There had always been something strange and distant about her. She wasn’t particularly beautiful, and she never understood why she had been named *Bella*. She didn’t understand why, whenever she entered a room, an unusual and electric tension filled the air, or why no one ever spoke to her in a normal voice—always with a hint of admiration or envy.

Her name was *Bella*, a French word for "beautiful". It was a rare name in Calandria, and whenever it was mentioned, no further explanation was needed: everyone knew it referred to her.

That afternoon, Bella sat on a bench in Calandrian Park. Next to her were a few books she had borrowed from the local library. She picked one up and placed it on her lap. The book had red covers, with the title engraved in gold: *Albert Camus – The Stranger*. Bella flipped through a few pages and muttered to herself:

"I don’t get what’s so special about this... I don’t understand... how did you do it, you damned, lucky bastard?"

She set the book aside and picked up another. Opening it at random, her finger landed on page 54. She began to read:

Not long ago, in a charming dream,
I saw myself—a king with a crown’s treasure;
I was in love with you, it seemed,
And my heart beat with pleasure.

"I don’t understand. I really don’t..." she whispered. "Although... maybe it sounds better in Russian..."

She pulled out a pack of cigarettes and lit one. Then she picked up another book—this one with soft blue covers, featuring a painted voodoo face. She looked at it and whispered to the face on the cover:
"Well, the ghosts know I’ve always wanted to be a writer. Why can everyone else do it, and I can’t? Why did the wise spirit, the great ruler of the sea and all the waters on Earth, bless only a few with talent?
Ah, big *Loa*, I’m modest—I don’t need a lot of money. I just want a cabin in the woods. I want to look at the sky, feed the hens, and... I just want to write books. I want to be

alone. I want to leave this city, escape this madding crowd, get away from all the chaos and the heat. These cities are filthy and overcrowded. These so-called future *Polises* are just hearts of pollution, prostitution, hot asphalt, and cheap synthetic drugs.

Ugh, how ridiculous is my imagination... and Calandria will go bankrupt soon. It's already a corpse. One more economic crisis and everything will collapse like a house of cards... and I'll never become a writer. I'll become a whore, because that's all I'll be good for. Supply and demand—that's all there is. Income and expense. Gross and net. It's all about money. There's nothing else in this world but money."

At that moment, the music playing in the city center abruptly stopped. A public announcement came from City Hall: Calandria had officially declared bankruptcy. All non-essential public jobs were to be abolished.

Since Bella worked in the city library archives, she had just lost her job.

Not knowing what to do, she threw her half-smoked cigarette on the ground and went to see her old friend Victor. He welcomed her and made tea. They sat across from each other, avoiding eye contact, afraid of seeing nothing but growing fear and hopelessness in each other's eyes.

"Help me, Victor. Please. What should I do?" she asked.

"I don't know, Bella. There are no jobs. No welfare. Nothing."

"Hunger," Bella concluded.

"I never thought it would happen so fast."

"Me neither."

"Great Depression... something terrible is coming."

"What can we do?" she asked, grabbing her forehead with trembling, sweaty palms. "Help me, and I'll repay you."

He looked at her as though trying to determine whether she meant it. In times of crisis and hunger, no one is truly a friend. Suspicion replaces "good morning," and empathy gives way to survival instinct. Still, some people use such times to grow richer. Victor knew such people well—and he could get Bella on the right path to survive the crisis.

"Go see the president of the regional union *Future*. Tell him I sent you. There's still money in the union fund. Try to get close to him, get him to appoint you as his assistant. You might not like him, but that's your best shot. Maybe you won't get paid, but there are vouchers—coupons for bread and milk."

"Thank you, Victor!" she said, jumping to her feet as if minutes would determine her fate. And fate felt wicked and dark, like the line between life and death was vanishing,

like the horizon—seemingly close and safe—only to disappear the moment you tried to reach it.

Meeting the president of the *Future* union was anything but simple. Outside his office stood a long queue of former workers: from the drug factory, the meat processing plant, the railways, and the cosmetics industry of Calandria. But Bella was privileged—because she was Bella. The president invited her in first.

Nicolas Vladimirovich, president of the *Future* union, was immature but polite. He wasn't as intimidating as she had feared. In fact, he was relatively young and even somewhat handsome. That was enough for Bella to start flirting. Nicolas, though married with two children, quickly picked up on her cues. He took her into a storage room beside the office, stripped off her clothes, and bent her over a few sharp wooden pallets. He was half-potent, taking longer than usual to reach satisfaction. When it was over, Bella gave him a fake smile. He was large and had hurt her, and that night, she struggled to sleep.

The next day, she debated whether to keep seeing Nicolas Vladimirovich—and decided to return.

And so it began.

Each Saturday: the same place, the same pallets, the same painful half an hour, the same tedious stories from Nicolas, and Bella's same false excitement about everything being "oh, so nice" and "ah, so perfect." Week after week, the same routine, the same union president. Bella felt both pity and disgust. Pity for his alcohol-wrecked body, for his once-strong but now useless sex, and disgust because she was slowly realizing that his position didn't carry as much power as she had hoped.

Two months passed before she finally swallowed her pride and asked to be appointed union assistant.

"Oh yes, yes, good, good. We'll see what we can do. Want a sip?" he said, offering her a glass of wine.

"No, thanks," she replied, her eyes dim.

"Why so blue, pretty girl? You're not starving."

"I'm living off my savings, which are slowly disappearing. I'm not hungry now—but I will be."

"Ah, you won't! You'll figure it out. You're a smart one. Line?" he offered her a line of cocaine, gifted to him by a rising Republican diplomat.

"The union assistant position is protected from dismissal," she said pointedly.

“Yeah, yeah, we’ll see... we’ll see,” he mumbled. “Damn, this stuff works. Coke as sweet as candy... Hey, did I ever tell you about Kitty Hamp? Oh, she was a bombshell. Everyone wanted her—no one got her. I proposed her a few times. Kitty kept rejecting me until she got drunk on this sweet new brandy. I remember... she wore tiger-print tights... big, full lips... perfect for... ugh, perfect for everything.”

Bella looked at him with an expression no man ever wants to see—an expression of pure pity and disdain.

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"What am I going to do now, Victor?!" she cried after ending things with Nicolas Vladimirovich.

Victor sighed. “Maybe we made a mistake with the union president. How about I introduce you to a CEO of an investment fund? What was his name... David?”

“David Duchovny? He’s gay.”

“All right then, I’ll set up a meeting with Ivan.”

“Ivan Virt... *The* Ivan?”

“Yes, *the* Ivan.”

Bella was speechless.

Ivan Virt was the infamous mayor of Calandria. At the start of his career, he was respected. But once in power, his reputation plummeted. He revealed his true nature—a manipulative psychopath, ruthless and ambitious to the point of trampling corpses to climb the ladder. His many rumored affairs, each filled with at least a kernel of truth, earned him the nickname *Ivan the Terrible*.

Bella had always sworn she would never go near him. No one, she said, could ruin her like he could. But she had no choice.

Her hand trembled on the doorknob of the mayor’s office. Her heart pounded in her throat, desperate to escape her chest. She was terrified. But what she found inside defied her fears.

The office was bright and airy. The usual portraits of industrialists and municipal achievements were gone, replaced by cheerful images of spring flowers. The desk had been moved to face the sun. Framed family photos and potted plants decorated the room. Ivan sat on a slightly elevated chair, surrounded by evenly spaced armchairs across the space. He welcomed her warmly and smiled with surprising kindness. The whole setting felt surreal—like a castle of light and blooms into which Bella, dressed in black with dark red lipstick, had wandered like an intruding witch.

Ivan introduced himself casually and spoke to her as though they were old friends. The conversation felt like a child's game played on some calm northern afternoon—in a world where bread was always guaranteed. His optimism, his confidence, the warmth radiating from him—he clearly believed in his own power to shape reality. Nothing could keep him from living surrounded by spring.

Bella was thrown into confusion: she felt both fear and attraction, alarm and longing. She saw herself as dark, pale, broken. She knew she had come with the lowest of motives—motives he fully understood.

They agreed to go on a date that very night.

Ivan took her to a luxurious restaurant and lit her cigarette like a gentleman. As they smoked, he leaned over the table and said softly:

"I don't want to force you into anything. If you don't want to be here, just leave."

"I don't know…" she said, uncertain.

"I must warn you—I'm a very demanding man."

"This sounds like a cheap novel," she laughed.

"I'm also a very generous man," he whispered. "I'll help you as much as I can."

He reached for her hand, and Bella let him take it.

They went to room 218 at a nearby hotel and shared a bottle of champagne. Ivan poured white powder on the table and made a line. Using a hundred-dollar bill, he snorted the cocaine and exhaled deeply. He offered it to Bella.

She shook her head.

"As you wish," he said. "Did you know Freud used cocaine? All modern anesthetics—even lidocaine—are derived from it. Good old Sigmund..."

Bella's heart tightened. She wanted to escape—from the room, the hotel, the city, the country. But Calandria was everywhere around her. No one escaped it.

Then Ivan opened a black briefcase.

Inside were chains, whips, and other toys she didn't recognize. She would come to know them well that night.

The night was long and cold. At three in the morning, Ivan lit a cigarette and handed Bella the stained hundred-dollar bill.

"That's it?" she asked.

"You're welcome," Ivan replied.

“I thought you’d help me. I thought you’d get me a job. With this money, I can survive for maybe two or three weeks. Then what?”

“I can’t help you.”

“You *can*. You just *won’t*.”

“Come on, sweetheart, take the money you earned and leave. Don’t test my patience.”

Bella walked out of room 218. A strong spring wind swept the streets, carrying the bittersweet scent of blooming trees. The streetlights burned with harsh intensity, and the world around her felt muted and distant. Disoriented, she made it home and collapsed into bed. She slept at dawn and didn’t wake until late afternoon.

The day was gray and heavy. Her whole body ached. She looked at the bill in her hand. It would cover a week’s rent and leave just enough for some bread. But after that?

She got up, washed her face, and went outside. She bought one-third of a loaf of bread and ate it standing. She wandered through Calandrian Square, observing the countless beggars on the streets. A Romani woman in a swirling, colorful dress grabbed her hand.

“Let me read your palm—let me see your fate!”

Bella silently pulled her hand back and stumbled into a pair of old men playing chess.

“There will be war,” said one.

“No, there won’t,” said the other. “The ghosts will help us. Tonight is Walpurgis Night.”

Bella was falling apart. She fled to the park and sat on a bench, weeping silently. Walpurgis Night was one of Calandria’s biggest holidays—a magnificent masquerade held in the city square. Spirits were said to descend to earth on Walpurgis Night. Baron Samedi, the great *Loa* of the dead, would drink rum with the living. The dead will dance with the living. And they will help them.

But for the first time in her life, on April 30, 2017, Bella didn’t have the strength to take part in the celebration. She sat alone, crying, as the sun set and the city prepared for its great rite. Despite the crisis, this Walpurgis Night was more crowded than ever. At one point, the power went out, plunging the city into darkness. But even by the modest glow of candlelight, the magnificent masked dancers continued to whirl.

Bella had only one cigarette left. She lit it. Next to the bench, someone had discarded a plastic cup. She picked it up, raised it to the sky, and whispered:

“Well, *Baron Samedi Veve*, here’s to our fucking future.”

Suddenly, a man appeared before her—dressed in a black cloak, wearing a white Venetian mask. He extended his hand to her.

“Come with me if you want to live,” he said.

“Arnold, is that you?” she laughed weakly.

“Close enough. My name is Adam. I want to help you—from the bottom of my heart.”

Bella looked at his hand. A silver ring in the shape of a goat’s head glinted on his white leather glove. She took the offered hand. He led her confidently to a nearby fast-food joint, where they sat.

Bella narrowed her eyes. “Take off your mask.”

“Of course,” he said, pausing. “But first, let me tell you something. I was a poor kid from Roubaix, trying to get a philosophy degree in Paris. I drove a cab to pay for my studies. Torture, really. I don’t even know why I did it—some dumb dream. I thought I’d become a professor, get a PhD, maybe even believe in that American dream bullshit. It was funny, and deep down, I knew it.

But when I realized how the world really works, I had a breakdown. One evening, I was walking the streets of Paris when something strange happened. Suddenly it wasn’t night anymore—it was broad daylight. And I wasn’t in Paris. I was standing in front of the Mad Hatter’s tea party.

Yes, *the* Mad Hatter. To his left was a talking piglet. To his right—the March Hare. For their own amusement, those lunatics sent me to Calandria... to be its mayor.”

Bella gasped. “*You’re* Adam? The Adam? The former mayor of Calandria? The whole city thinks you’re dead!”

“Shhh. Someone might hear you,” he said gently. “Let me finish. When they sent me here, I had no idea what I was doing. The Mad Hatter said my confusion was the fun part. But I couldn’t govern—I didn’t know how. That night, I sat by a fireplace and prayed to the spirits. Then the fire broke out.

I ran for the exit, but a metal safe blocked my path. It had fallen and cracked open. Inside, it was full of diamonds. I grabbed what I could and ran—but not fast enough. The fire caught me.”

Adam slowly removed the mask. The right side of his face was badly scarred.

“My God,” Bella whispered.

“I’m a beast now, dear. But a happy one. I bought a house on the outskirts of Calandria and vanished. I swore that one day, I’d help someone—just as the spirits helped me. Not the same way, of course. But... I will help you. I want nothing in return.”

That night, Bella went with Adam to his home.

“This will be your room,” he said, pointing to a large, cozy bedroom. “Mine is upstairs.”

Bella didn’t know how to thank him. In fact, for years, she’d only known one way to show gratitude—but it was something Adam never asked of her.

It was a strange twist of fate. In time, Adam became both a god and a king to her. For the first time, she felt no obligation to offer anything in return for kindness. She didn’t need to justify the admiration she felt for him. She was free. But this time, she *wanted* to give something in return. And when it happened, it was different. Gentle. Deep. Beauteous. It was love.

Eventually, Bella looked into the mirror—smiling, alive, saved. Reborn.

Character is destiny. And the character of the woman once called Bella was that of a wolf—ready to devour herself in despair and the pessimism of human weakness. That weakness, which had once chained her, had made her a woman—humiliated and scorned—but also voluptuous and cunning. It branded her, in the eyes of some, as just another Calandrian whore.

Before Adam, she believed that life was nothing more than chaos and chance. If you were born a slave, you'd die in the cotton field—no matter how fiercely you fought to change a destiny that cursed you from birth. Before Adam, she had given up, because fighting seemed meaningless.

But after Adam, she began to think that maybe Machiavelli was right: destiny only rules where the male strength is lacking to stop it.

Then, one Monday morning, Bella told Adam she had always wanted to be a writer. He encouraged her and arranged a meeting with a Parisian publisher. Calandria was still starving, but Bella boarded a train to Paris to chase her dream—funded by someone else’s diamonds.

She seemed to forget the night she raised her empty plastic cup and toasted *Baron Samedi*, begging the dead for help. She forgot that such gifts must be repaid. But she wasn’t the only one. All of Calandria had forgotten. And for that, the ghosts decided to take revenge.

While Bella was in Paris, war broke out.

It was April 30, 2018—Walpurgis Night—when Calandria was bombed. Adam died at the masquerade ball, dancing among the spirits.

After Calandria fell, no record remained of Bella’s life. No one knew if she survived, where she went, or how she lived. Only a single book remained behind—sold in just 250 copies. On its first page, it read:

"To all the beasts that are actually kings.

Le Roi est mort, vive le Roi!"

Unlike the famous tale, Bella was not the Beauty, and Adam was not the Beast.

Still, history was forgotten. And the legend became a fairy tale that defied death.

Who—or what—Bella truly was, remains blurred in memory. But one thing is certain: Adam was the man who stopped fate.

Notes

[←1] "Stand up, damned of the Earth", lyrics of "The Internationale"